

Way Too Ahead of the Airplane



Photo by Matthew J. Thomas

By Lt. Ben Clammer

We were set to return home to Pt. Mugu for a long weekend, after winding up a detachment in Fallon. We would be flying our DCAG, a former A-6 BN, to NAS Lemoore on an E-2C fam flight, then would press on to Mugu. Normally, the E-2 flies with two pilots in the front and three NFOs in the back. The Hawkeye is usually a handful to fly with two pilots, but, for this flight, I planned to be a single pilot, with DCAG in the right seat. I assumed our VIP passenger just was along for the ride, and I would be extra busy doing the flying, comms, nav, and driving the checklists.

During the ORM portion of our brief, we discussed having a passenger on board and ways to avoid get-home-itis. During the man-up, I briefed our DCAG on various emergencies in the plane, particularly how he would egress in case we had to ditch or bail out. As I worked through my start checks, I was surprised he knew his way around the cockpit, was very comfortable on the radios, and had good SA—for his first time in the front of an E-2.

We were cleared into position and hold, took the active runway, and finished our takeoff checks. The Hawkeye has six UHF radios, and having more than one radio selected at a time can saturate you with comm traffic, which was the case as we readied for departure. We heard tower clear an F-5 (with an almost identical call sign as ours) in for the break.


My crew in the back signaled they were ready to go, and DCAG gave me a thumbs up for takeoff. I advanced the throttles, and we began to roll. Shortly after we rotated, tower called and asked us to call the supervisor

when we landed. I shuddered to think what we had done wrong, as I still was busy completing the climb checks.

Once we were climbing safely, I asked DCAG what he thought the call was about. “I think they’re going to say we didn’t have clearance for takeoff,” he said. My heart sank. We had an O-6 in the front and my skipper in the back. Not a good way to show off my skills as an aircraft commander. We didn’t have time to discuss it because we got a generator light and were forced to return to Fallon.

After shutdown, we discussed the incident. Everyone felt confident they indeed had heard a clearance for takeoff. However, our fears that we had confused a similar call sign with clearance to break for our own takeoff clearance began to grow.

I called tower and they confirmed we indeed had not yet been cleared. I explained the confusion to the tower supervisor and accepted responsibility. “No harm, no foul” was a welcome response. Chock it up to a good lesson learned for everyone.

Many ingredients were present for this to happen. Having an O-6 passenger in the cockpit changes your familiar habit patterns and the dynamics of crew coordination. Wanting to get back for the long weekend was certainly a factor, too. As the AC, I knew safety of flight ultimately was my responsibility, and I accepted it. However, with five competent aircrew in the plane, rank should not have been an issue. We should have done a better job backing up each other, as we had briefed. Staying ahead of the plane always is imperative, but focusing on the immediate task at hand must remain the priority. 

Lt. Clammer flies with VAW-116.